

Despite international criticism, the government of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov continued its repressive policies and practices, including the persecution of religious minorities and political dissenters. In September, a coalition of several global civil society organizations released a report revealing the severity of physical and psychological abuse at the country's infamous Ovadan Depe prison.

Despite the recent creation of new political parties and the government's praise of the 2013 elections, several international reports have refuted claims to genuine progress. Not only are the new parties tied to the government, but the elections were marred by the persistence of irregularities, as in the past. Corruption continues to be widespread, and bribery is a common requirement for even basic public services.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 1 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

Turkmenistan is not an electoral democracy. Since its independence in 1991, none of the country's elections have been free or fair. The election commission has no meaningful independence from the executive branch. President Berdymukhammedov has maintained all the means and patterns of repression established by his predecessor, Saparmurat Niyazov, whose authoritarian rule lasted from 1985 to 2006. Berdymukhammedov was formally elected to his first five-year presidential term in 2007. Since then, he has gradually removed high-ranking Niyazov loyalists and taken steps to replace Niyazov as the subject of the state's cult of personality.

Under the 2008 constitution, the Mejlis became the sole legislative body, and its number of seats expanded from 50 to 125, with members elected to five-year terms from individual districts. The new charter gave citizens the right to form political parties; a new law outlining the requirements for party formation was approved by the Mejlis in 2012. A single deputy from the new state-sponsored Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs was seated in the Mejlis following a June 2013 by-election, marking the first time a member of a party other than the ruling Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT) had been elected to the legislature. In the December 2013 parliamentary elections, the DPT took 47 seats, followed by the Federation of Trade Unions with 33, the Women's Union with 16, the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs with 14, and a youth organization and other "citizen groups" with 8 and 7, respectively. In a March 2014 report, the OSCE charged that the elections did not embody the fundamental principles of democracy. The Mejlis remains tightly under executive control despite the appearance of pluralism.

Turkmenistan's last presidential election was held in 2012. While Berdymukhammedov had promised that the polls would include opposition candidates and adhere to international norms, all seven of his challengers were minor figures associated with the DPT. Berdymukhammedov was reelected to a second five-year term with 97 percent of the vote and 96 percent turnout, according to the country's election commission.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 1 / 16

The DPT, formerly the Soviet-era Communist Party of Turkmenistan, was the only party permitted to operate legally and field candidates for elections until 2013. The 2012 law on political parties specified the legal basis for any citizen to form an independent party, and barred parties formed on professional, regional, or religious lines, among other restrictions. Berdymukhammedov subsequently announced plans to form two new political parties—the Agrarian Party and the Party of Entrepreneurs and Industrialists—despite sections of the new law that forbid profession-based parties and bar government officials from creating parties. Both parties were openly organized by sitting members of the DPT; only the latter ultimately registered and participated in the 2013 elections. Aside from the DPT and the Party of Entrepreneurs and Industrialists, the entities that won seats were unions and civic groups affiliated with the state. A new committee for the creation of the Agrarian Party met in September 2014 and prepared a formal application for party registration, which was approved by the authorities.

C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12

Corruption in Turkmenistan is widespread. Many public officials are widely understood to have bribed their way into their positions. The government's lack of transparency affects nearly all spheres of the economy and public services, particularly in health care, an area many had hoped Berdymukhammedov would reform. The money that is invested in building state of the art medical facilities has created a façade that hides the critical problems in the health system facing Turkmen citizens. According to Chronicles of Turkmenistan, an online portal run by the exile-based Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, bribes are commonly used for gaining admission to top medical universities and even for buying grades; as a result, many medical personnel do not possess thorough training.

Decisions to award large-scale contracts to foreign companies are ultimately made by the president without any effective legal control or oversight, with bribes playing a key part in the process. Allocation of state profits from hydrocarbon exports remains opaque. A 2011 amendment to the 2008 Law on Hydrocarbon Resources expanded the president's near-total control over the hydrocarbon sector and the revenue it produces; additional amendments in 2012 allowed the state agency for hydrocarbon resources to establish companies, buy a direct stake in foreign companies, and open branches abroad. According to a 2011 report by Crude Accountability, an environmental group that works in the Caspian Sea region, only 20 percent of revenues from the sale of state-owned hydrocarbons are transferred to the state budget; the rest is controlled by the hydrocarbon agency, which is directly subordinate to the president.

Turkmenistan was ranked 169 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 5 / 60 (-1)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 2 / 16

Freedom of the press is severely constrained by the government, which controls nearly all broadcast and print media. Although internet penetration is low, Turkmenistan's main internet service provider is run by the government and restricts access, including by blocking undesirable websites and monitoring user activity. The authorities remained hostile to news reporting in 2014, and sought to suppress any independent sources of information. Although the 2013 media law banned press monopolies and censorship, the government continues to severely restrict independent media. The few independent

reporters that still operate in Turkmenistan risk detention by the authorities; rights groups suspect that imprisoned journalists are subject to torture.

The government restricts freedom of religion. Religious groups are required to register with state authorities, and practicing an unregistered religion remains illegal, with violators subject to fines. Many minority religious groups have been refused registration, and some face harassment from authorities. Jehovah's Witnesses, who are conscientious objectors to compulsory military service, continued to report arbitrary detention, harassment, and violence by state authorities in 2014. Changes to the administrative code in 2013 introduced fines for the dissemination of religious literature, among other measures.

The government places significant restrictions on academic freedom. Since 2009, students bound for university study abroad have routinely been denied exit visas.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

The constitution guarantees freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, but in practice, these rights are severely restricted. Sporadic protests, usually focused on social issues, have taken place in recent years. In August and November 2014, dozens of Ashgabat residents participated in protests to block cranes sent by the government to forcibly remove air conditioners from apartment windows; the residents had defied a municipal order to remove the devices. The removal operations reportedly ceased on both occasions.

A new Law on Public Associations entered into force in May 2014. The new law includes slight improvements for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), among them the ability of foreign individuals and entities to found and join organizations. However, restrictive provisions remain. NGOs face onerous registration requirements, and authorities have wide latitude to monitor NGO activities and funding. Turkmenistan is still home to a few dedicated activists, but there is virtually no organized civil society sector.

The government-controlled Association of Trade Unions of Turkmenistan is the only central trade union permitted. Workers are barred by law from bargaining collectively or staging strikes.

F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16 (-1)

The judicial system is subservient to the president, who appoints and removes judges without legislative review. The authorities frequently deny rights of due process, including public trials and access to defense attorneys. Prison conditions are unsanitary and overcrowded, and recent revelations have highlighted the extent of mistreatment facing inmates. According to international watchdogs, security forces use various forms of torture and violence—including rape, asphyxiation, starvation, and forcible administration of drugs—against suspects and inmates.

The government has released a number of political prisoners since Niyazov's death in 2006, but many others remain behind bars. Many long-term political prisoners have been subject to enforced disappearance, and nothing is known about the condition of jailed former foreign ministers Boris Shikhmuradov and Batyr Berdyev, and some 28 others. Amnesty International has received reports that harassment, arbitrary imprisonment, and torture of political opponents is widespread. A September 2014 report by the Prove They Are Alive! campaign, initiated by a collective of civil society organizations called

the Turkmenistan Civic Solidarity Group, extensively documented the torture practices employed by prison workers in Ovadan Depe, where most political prisoners are reportedly held. The report, compiled using satellite imagery and eyewitness accounts, confirmed long-standing beliefs about the severity and systematized nature of abuse in the prison.

Employment and educational opportunities for ethnic minorities are limited by the government's promotion of Turkmen national identity. The law does not protect LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people from discrimination, and traditional social taboos make even discussion of LGBT issues difficult. Sexual activity between men is illegal in Turkmenistan and punishable with up to two years in prison and an additional term of up to five years in a labor camp.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 3 / 16

Freedom of movement is restricted, with a reported blacklist preventing some individuals from leaving the country. A few activists who hold dual citizenship and continue to reside in Turkmenistan are able to travel abroad using their Russian passports. In 2013, the government approved the issuance of Turkmen travel documents to tens of thousands of Turkmen-Russian dual citizens who had spent years with no clear legal status after the Turkmen parliament approved a measure revoking a dual-citizenship pact with Russia in 2003.

A Soviet-style command economy and widespread corruption diminish the equality of opportunity. The constitution establishes the right to property ownership, but the deeply flawed judiciary provides little protection to businesses and individuals. Arbitrary evictions and confiscation of property are common. In February 2014, landlords evicted several small businesses in Ashgabat without official reason or documentation, effectively driving them out of business.

Traditional social and religious norms, inadequate education, and poor economic conditions limit professional opportunities for women, and NGO reports suggest that domestic violence is common.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)